

Top rightwing Brazil newspaper demands removal of Bolsonaro

Call comes as outrage over Covid and corruption drags president's ratings to lowest ever level



Jair Bolsonaro: polls show that a majority of Brazilians consider him unfit to govern and back his impeachment.

Tom Phillips in Rio de Janeiro
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One of Brazil's leading conservative newspapers has demanded the removal of the country's president, Jair Bolsonaro, as public outrage over his coronavirus response and corruption dragged the rightwing populist's ratings to their lowest ever level.

"Jair Bolsonaro is no longer in a position to remain in the presidency," O Estado de São Paulo declared on Sunday as polls showed that for the first time a majority of citizens backed impeachment and considered their leader incapable of governing.

Bolsonaro, a former paratrooper and an admirer of Donald Trump, took office in January 2019, using social media to portray himself as a corruption-busting anti-establishment maverick who had come to drain Brazil's swamp. Critics have long questioned that image, pointing to incessant accusations of low-level corruption and mafia ties that have dogged Bolsonaro's family.

The anger appears to have spread across Brazil's electorate in recent weeks, largely thanks to an unfolding scandal over allegedly corrupt Covid vaccine deals and

Bolsonaro's handling of the country's Covid-19 outbreak, which has killed more than 530,000 people.

"This is Jair Bolsonaro's worst moment. He's melting and the idea people have of him is melting," said Eliane Cantanhêde, a political columnist for O Estado de S Paulo, who said a congressional inquiry had laid bare the president's "crass and preposterous" pandemic response.

Another major newspaper, Folha de São Paulo, said on Saturday that Bolsonaro, who has faced a wave of recent protests, was suffering "a full-scale image meltdown".

The newspaper's polling division, Datafolha, said 54% of Brazilians thought he should be impeached, up from 49% in May, and 63% believed him incapable of governing, up from 58%. Most voters considered their president "dishonest, insincere, incompetent, unprepared, indecisive, authoritarian and dim", Folha said.

Perhaps most worrying for Bolsonaro was the finding that 59% of voters would not back him under any circumstances in next year's election, when he hopes to secure a second four-year term.

Datafolha's poll suggests the leftwing former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva would trounce Bolsonaro in the 2022 race, with a 20-point gap between the two. "It will be the Brazilian people who free themselves of Bolsonaro," Lula told the Guardian recently after regaining his political rights.

Growing rightwing calls for Bolsonaro's impeachment seem partly driven by conservative angst over Lula's return. Some on the right opposed to the president believe the only way to block the leftist's path to power is to oust Bolsonaro and confront Lula with a less divisive rightwing candidate.

Bolsonaro appears to be feeling the heat, apparently trying to distract from the Covid crisis and corruption allegations with a series of anti-democratic outbursts in which he has groundlessly questioned Brazil's voting system.

"Either we have clean elections or we won't have elections," Bolsonaro declared last week before calling the head of the superior electoral court an imbecile.

"Everything is going against Bolsonaro and he's reacting badly," Cantanhêde said, adding that it was unclear whether his attacks on democracy were "merely ranting" or part of a genuine plot to cling to power with the support of some elements of the armed forces.

O Estado de S Paulo, which did not oppose Bolsonaro's election despite his long history of anti-democratic rhetoric, savaged that "explicit threat" to Brazil's democracy. It called the president "a spoiled child ... bedevilled by a succession of moral, political, criminal and administrative misfortunes".

"The threats to our institutions and democracy must stop," the broadsheet said, urging the head of the lower house, Arthur Lira, to start impeachment proceedings, something analysts believe remains unlikely.